



Virtual Peer-Mentoring Programs:

Building Global Professional Connections Through the International Librarians Network

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Introduction

This chapter focuses on the International Librarians Network (ILN) peer-mentoring program and the opportunities it provided to build a global professional network. The chapter will be of interest to librarians who are interested in expanding their network internationally while developing as professionals through a well-run, informal, virtual peer-mentoring program. We will present a case study of our experience as ILN program participants in spring 2016. Our aim is to explore the effectiveness of the ILN program, in part to determine how long-distance peer-mentoring programs like these can help build international connections between libraries and librarians and contribute to our professional development.

We first present background information and details regarding the practical implementation of the ILN program. Then we move on to review research about virtual mentoring, peer mentoring, and informal mentoring, all of which are components of the ILN's approach. In the evaluation section, we discuss the ways in which the ILN's implementation of best practices recommended in the literature contributed to the program's effectiveness, as evidenced by the authors' experience and other participants' positive evaluations. Finally, we conclude the chapter with possible directions for a similar program and suggestions for future research.

Background

The International Librarians Network (ILN) was a facilitated peer-mentoring program designed to help librarians build international connections. The first ILN round was launched as a pilot project in 2013, and the program was administered twice a year until the end of 2016. Altogether, there were eight program runs with more than 5,500 participants from more than 130 countries.¹ During its existence, the program grew rapidly: in three years, the number of participants in a single round grew from ninety-two to 1,162 (see figure 29.1). The program was run by volunteers, first informally and later as a non-profit association.² The program was discontinued in 2017 when the founders of the ILN concluded that running the program on a volunteer basis was not sustainable in the long term. The processes used to run the program will be documented and shared under a Creative Commons license.³

ILN round	Participants	Countries
Pilot (2013)	92	18
2013B	391	39
2014A	764	76
2014B	630	73
2015A	820	79
2015B	862	85
2016A	1,162	95

Figure 29.1. ILN participants by program round⁴

The ILN was started in 2012 by three Australian librarians, Kate Byrne, Alyson Dalby, and Clare McKenzie. The idea behind the program was to offer librarians a chance to meet fellow professionals from other parts of the world without the expense of international travel. The founders developed the ILN concept of a semi-structured peer-mentoring program by borrowing elements from different professional development formats. The ILN also regularly surveyed participants since the program’s founding, and the ILN model evolved over time in response to that feedback.⁵

Applications to the program were made online via a form on the ILN website. Applicants were asked to provide information about their interests, career stage, and the library sector in which they work. It was also possible to indicate some wishes about the partners’ interests or work background. ILN administrators formed mentor pairs based on their applications by matching successful applicants with someone outside their country. The ILN model did not require the participants to be at similar career stages or to work in the same library sector. This enabled the ILN to draw from a wider pool of participants and avoid the problem of an insufficient number of mentors. The ILN participants seemed to be open-minded about their prospective partners—approximately half of the applicants did not list any specific requests for potential partners⁶—probably partly due to the global nature of the program.

The ILN primarily facilitated the program by sending suggested discussion topics to participants every other week. For example, in the 2016A round, they distributed nine

topics ranging from library spaces to management and leadership, library advocacy, and professional development. Ultimately, the mentor pairs naturally decided on the topics they wanted to discuss. The use of discussion topics to structure conversation grew during the existence of the program: in the early rounds of the program, only half of the participants were using discussion topics, whereas in later rounds, the figure was closer to 90 percent.⁷ It seems likely that with the growth and development of the program, the topics, or their introduction, had been refined and thus became more useful to participants.

The main communication method used in the ILN program was email, which was preferred by the program administrators as well. Surveys conducted by the ILN show that almost all participants used email to communicate with their partners.⁸ The ILN encouraged the mentor pairs to discuss platforms and then choose the communication methods most suitable for them, but also to try different methods, such as Skype meetings in addition to e-mail discussions. The ILN also arranged open discussions on Twitter and Facebook. The participants were often in different global time zones, which partly explains the popularity of asynchronous communication methods such as email.

The authors participated in the second-to-last ILN program round, 2016A, which took place between February and May 2016. Most of the examples mentioned in the article are based on this program round and on our individual experiences. For example, the discussion topics and methods of participation may have been different in other rounds or even for other mentor pairs within the same program round. For both authors, this was the first and only time we participated in the program. We mostly communicated by email but also had a few online meetings via Adobe Connect. Neither of us participated in the public Facebook or Twitter chats arranged by the program, so our program experience is based on direct communication within the mentor pair, which we feel was the core of the program.

Literature Review

The general topic of mentoring has received significant attention in the library and information science literature, but several aspects of the ILN program made the mentoring relationship unique, such as:

1. Mentor pairs were usually peers rather than a senior librarian paired with a junior librarian.
2. The relationship was entirely virtual and involved no in-person contact.
3. While the program operated very professionally, mentor relationships were informal and flexible.
4. Partners were from very different institutions in different positions and, of course, came from all around the globe.

This literature review is focused on virtual mentoring, peer mentoring, and informal mentoring, which are all components of the ILN's approach and are well-represented in the literature. While little investigation of the ILN's specific brand of international, virtual, and informal peer-mentoring programs has been conducted thus far, their methods have a strong theoretical and practical basis, as seen in the literature and detailed in the ILN's 2016 report.⁹

The literature provides a significant corpus of best practices and lessons learned that, along with being invaluable for those who are developing a mentoring program, can also be utilized to evaluate the ILN's approach. We reviewed key works that are applicable to

the ILN model in order to determine whether our experience was in part due to the ILN founders' adherence to best practices.

First, electronic, or virtual, mentoring in libraries goes back to the early days of email, and several more recent articles discuss virtual mentoring programs in detail.¹⁰ As mentioned in the 2016 ILN report,¹¹ these all predate the ubiquitous use of social media, smartphones, and other systems that facilitate communication at a distance, but many of their recommendations stand. In a 2007 article, Samantha Hines describes founding an online career-mentoring program in 2004, during her term as co-chair of the American Library Association's New Member Roundtable (NMRT).¹² New professionals were matched up with experienced colleagues based on input provided via an online form. Monthly discussion topics were distributed to mentor pairs, who were asked to communicate at least twice a month. Hines provides numerous suggestions for developing a virtual mentoring program, such as providing a contact for technical concerns, communicating to participants that mentor pairs may not necessarily be "soulmate relationship[s]" but can still be valuable and informative, and expressing that both partners need to dedicate time to the relationship.¹³

In another 2007 article, Hilbun and Akin describe efforts to establish an e-mentoring program for school library media specialists in a very large school district. While this example varies greatly from both the ILN and NMRT contexts, their recommendations are similar: ensure a formal structure is implemented, establish specific goals between mentor and protégée, and provide technical and administrative support.¹⁴

The more recent Finlayson article describes a narrower program in which mentors were assigned to protégées to support their completion of a specific project during a set time frame after a library merger.¹⁵ That said, recommendations were again rather similar: more training should be provided for mentors, as well as more time dedicated to the relationship by both parties, with the support of administration.¹⁶

The ILN employs a peer-mentoring approach that moves away from the senior colleague mentoring a junior librarian model of the preceding articles. Peer mentoring has also received significant attention in the literature, with several articles demonstrating its effectiveness.¹⁷ While Mavrinac primarily discusses values-based transformational change, the learning culture necessary to achieve it, and how peer mentoring can contribute to those efforts, this article lists numerous positive aspects of peer mentoring, such as its democratic nature, distribution of mentorship across boundaries, mutual benefits, and the ability for multiple mentors with different perspectives to support a single protégée.¹⁸ In fact, "research indicates that mentoring relationships between peers provide similar benefits to traditional mentoring in the areas of psychosocial support such as confirmation, emotional support, and career development, as well as providing feedback, information sharing, and career planning."¹⁹

In a 2005 article, Level describes a peer-mentoring group formed to bring tenure-track librarians together to discuss the tenure process. The program was specific to one institution and operated alongside a formal one-on-one mentoring program employing more traditional senior/junior mentor pairs. Administrative support was mentioned as a key requirement, so librarians felt comfortable taking the time to participate. Other recommendations include maintaining flexibility, making involvement purely voluntary, and allowing time for open discussions.²⁰

Another peer-mentoring program established within the City University of New York (CUNY) brought together junior library faculty from twenty different libraries of various sizes. Cirasella and Smale explain that communication took place online and in-person, and

meeting topics and discussions typically focused on research, scholarship, and professional development concerns specific to early career library faculty members. This experience can be applied more directly to the ILN, as the disparate tenure requirements of each library precluded official discussion of the process itself and meant that the program has served primarily to unite pre-tenure librarians into a community of scholars with similar concerns.²¹ Assessment data, primarily in the form of member surveys, was key to shifting programming and communication to better meet participant needs as the program progressed.

While his work is primarily focused on the ability of virtual peer mentoring (VPM) to support evidence-based practice in librarianship, Jonathan Eldredge contends that a model combining the virtual mentoring approach with the less-traditional peer-mentoring approach allows information professionals to be more productive in their organizations. Eldredge shares two recommendations for successful VPM programs. First, it is important to establish a social presence, which he defines as “avenues for presenting VPM participants as lifelike, trustworthy, and authentic as possible at a distance in order to approximate face-to-face communication.”²² He also emphasizes the importance of employing cultural sensitivity when building mentor relationships.

Finally, the third well-studied aspect of the ILN program is informal mentorship, which has received positive treatment in the literature like that of peer mentorship.²³ James, Rayner, and Bruno surveyed Illinois academic library employees to determine if they were participating in informal mentorship arrangements and, if so, whether those were valuable. The results contributed to several recommendations for successful approaches: initiative and openness is required on the part of the mentor, as are “two people who are willing to work together in a mutually acceptable way to address the concerns of the mentee, and to share relevant knowledge, expertise, and wisdom.”²⁴

Appleton also obtained feedback, by conducting case studies of three high-performing employees in a British information resource center, to determine how their informal mentorships contributed to their success. He determined that “an informal framework, where the organization has had no input into the mentorship, is far more likely to result in professional development and career progression.”²⁵ Informal mentorship also encourages reflective practice, as the mentor inspires the mentee to reflect on their own work, rather than giving specific guidance to the mentee as to how to approach a challenge. Having someone to bounce ideas off allows mentees to gain professional insight and inspiration. As with peer mentoring, multiple informal mentors can each provide individual insights.²⁶

Evaluation

Both authors had extremely positive experiences with the ILN mentoring program. In a 2016 newsletter article, we both recommended the well-structured program as an excellent way to build more in-depth relationships than is possible in a conference setting, without the time and expense of travel.²⁷ Through this mentor relationship, we were inspired to consider alternative approaches to our work and professional development. The program also gave us perspective on the many similarities and differences in academic librarianship as practiced in different countries. The ability to ask questions back and forth during one-on-one discussions helped create a more thorough understanding of the other person’s institution and working context than would be possible through just reading an article or listening to a presentation.

The broad discussion topics shared by the ILN program directors contributed to our positive experience, as librarians in different positions at different institutions could relate to them more than narrower topics that might only apply to one type of library. We found that these suggested topics frequently led us to further discussion. For example, the first suggested topic was space. After sharing photos of our respective offices, Kelsey learned that Pirjo works from two different campuses, switching back and forth depending on the day of the week. That led us to a discussion about the many different responsibilities that a solo librarian in a small institution must handle, such as database management, library usage reporting, library instruction, collaborating on research projects, etc. While Kelsey's position is much more specialized, we agreed that we both enjoy the fact that you never know what a day is going to be like and it is therefore it is difficult to get bored over time.

These discussions, especially those regarding management and leadership in libraries, led to some of the most fascinating observations for us about how things are done in other countries. The University of Maryland (UMD) Libraries are, of course, much larger than the Humak University of Applied Sciences and so is far more hierarchical in structure. Kelsey was surprised to learn that Pirjo is the only librarian at her campus and her supervisor has no library background. Her librarian colleagues are distributed around Finland, so only meet in person a few times a year and conduct all other business virtually. From a Finnish perspective, Pirjo was surprised to learn that the recruitment process for faculty positions at American university libraries was so in-depth, with twelve-hour interview days, including presentations. The concept of a leased collection (UMD leases a popular reading collection that circulates at a high rate) was new to Pirjo as well. Overall, we both learned a great deal about how other libraries operate and we were able to incorporate new ideas into our work.

ILN participant survey results reflect our rewarding experiences. Respondents report a satisfaction rate of 80 to 90 percent and mention benefits such as "a widening of their professional awareness," "encountering new ideas," and "an increase in professional confidence" in their responses.²⁸ Along with the survey results, the 2016 ILN report features a case study of a repeat participant,²⁹ Jenny Mustey, who has published a glowing personal evaluation similar to our newsletter article,³⁰ as have several other participants. One early participant, Renee Mason, who began her career in librarianship at a remote library in China, remarked, "For those of us who work in environments where it can sometimes feel like we are isolated from the world, [our networks] can often be the only source of validation."³¹ The benefits of the ILN, especially the ability to forge international connections without the need for travel funds, were also touted by Shaharima Parvin in her article describing the operations of the East West University Library in Bangladesh.³²

In reviewing the literature, it became apparent that the ILN participants' positive experiences can be attributed to the program founders having implemented the best practices and recommendations found therein. A strong structure, specific information about how to rectify any technical issues, clear expectations for participant time commitment, and an emphasis on staying open-minded about how you might benefit from a non-traditional mentor pairing, were key factors recommended by multiple authors investigating virtual mentoring programs.³³ The authors' experience substantiates the research that shows the benefits of a non-traditional peer-mentoring arrangement,³⁴ in that two librarians at the same points in their careers, working at very different institutions, had a successful relationship and learned many things from each other. Another mentor pair,

Pan and Robinson, also “found that despite very different backgrounds and training, the essence of our roles was not disparate.”³⁵ The ILN’s willingness to adjust the program based on feedback between each round of mentoring was also recommended in the literature and certainly contributed to the program’s success, as did the voluntary nature of the program.³⁶ Only truly interested librarians sought out the opportunity and signed up to participate.

Two slightly more abstract concepts set forth in the literature also directly contributed to the success of the ILN program: social presence and reflective practice.³⁷ Social presence, recommended by Eldredge to insert the human component into a virtual relationship, was also fostered by the ILN program. Their suggestion that mentor pairs try technologies, such as Skype or Adobe Connect, for face-to-face communication and to share social media accounts, etc. enriched the authors’ experience, built trust, and amplified the human connection at a distance. Reflective practice, as discussed by Appleton, was the primary mode in which the authors’ discussions benefited their work and provided an avenue to incorporate disparate experiences in very different settings into our work. While neither of us was trying to teach or guide the other, hearing how we approach different challenges made us think about how we could do our work differently. Inspiration, also cited by Appleton as a benefit of informal mentorship, was another vehicle through which we translated our discussions into our work.

Conclusion

As this chapter was being written, the authors were disappointed to learn that the founders of the ILN had decided to discontinue the program, as we had both planned to participate in another round of the mentoring program to further grow our international networks and meet librarians in different countries. The ILN had been run entirely on a volunteer basis, and the founders concluded that it could not be sustained long-term.³⁸ The ILN founders indicated that they will document the processes used to run the program and share the documentation under a Creative Commons license in order to make it possible for others to build on their efforts.

The popularity of the program, with more than 5,500 participants from more than 130 countries in four years shows that there is strong interest in international librarianship in the form of a global peer-mentoring program. It would be interesting to see a program like this run by an international organization with better support and infrastructure, such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA). The program could also be organized in other widely spoken languages, such as French or Spanish.

The ILN model of a virtual peer-mentoring program could also be adapted to work in more finite contexts—for example, within a nation such as the United States. Individual elements of the program could be adapted to different settings, rather than attempting to resurrect and run a full version of the program. That said, the ILN program’s successful strategies should not be ignored, as they are well-supported by the literature. That literature could be bolstered through investigating more recent virtual mentoring programs conducted in libraries. Technological advances mean that the authors could have a face-to-face conversation via smartphone while walking around campus, which was simply not possible when the earlier virtual mentoring programs discussed herein were implemented.

Notes

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2. Kate Byrne, Alyson Dalby, and Clare McKenzie, "Introducing the International Librarians Network Incorporated," *International Librarians Network*, March 24, 2015, <http://interlibnet.org/2015/03/25/introducing-the-international-librarians-network-incorporated/>.
3. Byrne, Dalby, and McKenzie, "The Future of the ILN."
4. Data sourced from Kate Byrne, Alyson Dalby, and Clare McKenzie, "Rethinking Mentoring: Online, International Peer-Mentoring with the International Librarians Network," June 14, 2016, https://figshare.com/articles/Rethinking_Mentoring_Online_International_Peer-Mentoring_with_the_International_Librarians_Network/3413632, 4.
5. *Ibid.*, 4, 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 5–6.
7. *Ibid.*, 7.
8. *Ibid.*, 7.
9. *Ibid.*, 4–6.
10. Samantha Schmehl Hines, "Adventures in Online Mentoring: The New Member's Roundtable Career Mentoring Program," *Journal of Web Librarianship* 1, no. 4 (October 2007): 51–65, doi:10.1080/19322900802111411; Janet Hilbun and Lynn Akin, "E-Mentoring for Librarians and Libraries," *Texas Library Journal* 83, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 28–32; Avenal Finlayson, "Electronic Mentoring and Academic Librarians: A Case Study," *Innovation*, no. 39 (December 2009): 58–72.
11. Byrne, Dalby, and McKenzie, "Rethinking Mentoring," 4.
12. Hines, "Adventures in Online Mentoring," 52.
13. *Ibid.*, 59.
14. Hilbun and Akin, "E-Mentoring for Librarians and Libraries," 31.
15. Finlayson, "Electronic Mentoring and Academic Librarians," 58–72.
16. *Ibid.*, 71.
17. Allison V. Level and Michelle Mach, "Peer Mentoring: One Institution's Approach to Mentoring Academic Librarians," *Library Management* 26, no. 6/7 (September 2005): 301–10, doi:10.1108/01435120410609725; Jill Cirasella and Maura Smale, "Peers Don't Let Peers Perish: Encouraging Research and Scholarship Among Junior Library Faculty," *Collaborative Librarianship* 3, no. 2 (April 2011): 98–109; Mary Ann Mavrinac, "Transformational Leadership: Peer Mentoring as a Values-Based Learning Process," *Portal: Libraries & the Academy* 5, no. 3 (July 2005): 391–404.
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19. *Ibid.*, 398.
20. Level and Mach, "Peer Mentoring," 309–10.
21. Cirasella and Smale, "Peers Don't Let Peers Perish," 106.
22. Jonathan D. Eldredge, "Virtual Peer Mentoring (VPM) May Facilitate the Entire EBLIP Process," *Evidence Based Library & Information Practice* 5, no. 1 (April 2010): 9.
23. Julie James, Ashley Rayner, and Jeannette Bruno, "Are You My Mentor? New Perspectives and Research on Informal Mentorship," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 5 (September 2015): 532–39, doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2015.07.009; Leo Appleton, "Informal Mentoring in Library and Information Services," *Impact: Journal of the Career Development Group* 7, no. 3 (October 2004): 54–58.
24. James, Rayner, and Bruno, "Are You My Mentor?," 537.
25. Appleton, "Informal Mentoring in Library and Information Services," 55.
26. *Ibid.*, 57.
27. Pirjo Kangas and Kelsey Corlett-Rivera, "Making Connections Abroad through the International Librarians Network," *WESS Newsletter*, Fall 2016, https://wessweb.info/index.php/Making_Connections_Abroad_through_the_International_Librarians_Network.

28. Byrne, Dalby, and McKenzie, "Rethinking Mentoring," 8–9.
29. Ibid., 10.
30. Jenny Mustey, "ILN: A Meeting Place for Librarians from Around the World," *inCite* 36, no. 9 (September 2015): 22–23.
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32. Shaharima Parvin, "The East West University Library: Sharing My Personal Experiences," *International Leads* 30, no. 3 (September 2016): 1–5.
33. Hines, "Adventures in Online Mentoring," 51–65; Hilbun and Akin, "E-Mentoring for Librarians and Libraries," 28–32; Finlayson, "Electronic Mentoring and Academic Librarians," 58–72.
34. Level and Mach, "Peer Mentoring," 301–10; Cirasella and Smale, "Peers Don't Let Peers Perish," 98–109; Mavrinac, "Transformational Leadership," 391–404.
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36. Cirasella and Smale, "Peers Don't Let Peers Perish," 98–109.
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